



COUNTY OF LOS ANGELES  
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February 1, 2007

TO: Each Supervisor

FROM: Jonathan E. Fielding, M.D., M.P.H.  
Director and Health Officer

SUBJECT: **7<sup>th</sup> STREET PRODUCE MARKET**

Investigative reporter Joel Grover (KNBC Channel 4) has been working on an undercover report concerning wholesale produce markets in downtown Los Angeles, specifically focusing on the 7<sup>th</sup> Street Produce Market. The investigative report is scheduled to air tonight, February 1, 2007, at 11:00 p.m.

The report is expected to include undercover graphic images depicting poor food handling practices and inappropriate behavior by an operator of the wholesale food market. It is also expected to include undercover footage suggesting lax enforcement by Environmental Health staff assigned to this market. Terrance Powell, Acting Director of Environmental Health, was interviewed on camera for the report and was shown some of this footage for his reaction.

The older downtown produce markets, and particularly the market that is the subject of the KNBC report have a history of poor food handling practices and facility maintenance. The 7<sup>th</sup> St. Produce Market has many inherent site problems, such as poor design for easy loading of vehicles, the absence of loading docks, and minimal shared bathroom facilities. Although these problems complicate the inspection and enforcement processes, we believe that Environmental Health inspectors assigned to these markets until recent changes in personnel did not provide effective enforcement.

In November 2006, Environmental Health received a request from KNBC for records relating to the inspections of several of the downtown produce markets. Review of records by senior Environmental Health staff suggested problems with enforcement. Environmental Health staff conducted a site evaluation of the 7<sup>th</sup> Street Market on November 21, 2006. The findings and the corresponding actions as a result of our assessment of the facilities located at 746 S. Central Ave., Los Angeles (commonly referred to as the 7<sup>th</sup> Street Produce Market) are described below.

## **Facility Site Evaluation**

The evaluation revealed numerous health code violations including: 1) accumulation of trash and debris; 2) liquid containing produce waste; 3) a significant portion of Building A-3 damaged by fire several months ago and left without repair; 4) refrigeration units in various stages of disrepair; 5) tenant space and storage capacity exceeded; 6) insufficient number of, and overflowing trash receptacles; 7) inadequate security to control vehicle and customer entry; 8) broken and boarded windows on the second floor of the building located above the food storage areas presenting potential for overhead contamination; 9) numerous pigeons; and 10) inadequate rodent proofing. Overall, the age and design of the facility and the level of overall maintenance is not an environment supporting safe produce handling.

The State Health and Safety code contains different requirements for wholesale facilities than for retail, and does not include facility grading. It allows a few local jurisdictions, including Los Angeles County, to license and inspect wholesale facilities. The criteria for inspections are different from restaurants and individual vendors are licensed, not the facility as a whole.

The conditions observed create an environment accessible conducive to pilfering by illegal retailers, illegal wholesalers and transients, attempting to re-use food otherwise deemed unfit for human consumption.

Based on the evaluation, all wholesale food establishments in the facility were inspected individually. This effort began on November 27, 2006 and continues through the present. Sixty-nine sites, representing all food businesses within the complex, were inspected resulting in 40 office hearings and 22 closures as follows:

- 6 for rodent infestations
- 16 for no public health license

Subsequent compliance inspections resulted in 42 closures as follows:

- 2 for rodents
- 7 for rodents and no hot water
- 31 for no hot water
- 1 for no hot water and no public health license
- 1 for no trash receptacle

One of the problems of the market is the high rate of turn-over of vendors, as evidenced by the fact that 25% of the individual vendors did not have the required public health license.

In addition to the individual closure notices described above, the 7<sup>th</sup> Street Produce Market complex management was also issued a Notice of Violation and was required to attend an office hearing regarding 1) the lack of hot water, 2) discarded produce and waste on the ground in and around the market, 3) rodent harborage and proofing, 4) produce storage and handling, and 5) cleaning and maintenance.

At our request, the 7<sup>th</sup> Street Produce Market complex management hosted a meeting attended by their individual vendors/operators on Thursday, January 25, 2007. Mr. Powell and I attended. Environmental Health presented the inspection findings and information about the enforcement actions. We strongly stated our determination to protect the health of the public and achieve continued and sustained compliance in the market.

We are working with the Los Angeles City Attorney to prepare a criminal complaint against the complex management and the non-compliant wholesale food establishment operators.

Additional actions we have completed or are implementing include:

- Daily onsite presence of Environmental Health inspectors
- Referral of structural concerns, including the wastewater system to the Los Angeles City Building and Safety Department
- Evaluation of the entire complex by the Vector management unit of Environmental health
- Exploration of other enforcement options with County Counsel
- Supplemental inspection of other wholesale produce complexes to determine the level of facility sanitation and food safety practices.

The inspector previously assigned to the market has been reassigned and we are reviewing the performance of the inspector and supervisor.

KNBC has requested, and we have provided records, of the inspections and closures described above, which occurred subsequent to their initial request for records.

If you have any questions, please let me know.

JEF:dc

c: Chief Administrative Officer  
County Counsel  
Executive Officer, Board of Supervisors